

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 071 587

HE 003 722

AUTHOR Ryba, Gary
TITLE Student Reaction to Campus Disruption: Spring '69.
INSTITUTION State Univ. of New York, Buffalo. Univ. Research
Office.
PUB DATE Apr 70
NOTE 16p.
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.65 HC-\$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Activism; College Students; *Demonstrations (Civil);
*Higher Education; *Student Attitudes; *Student
Opinion

ABSTRACT

The spring of 1969 at the State University of New York at Buffalo was a time of student protest. The student's demands for change involved both campus and off-campus issues: (1) that students control 50% of the voting power in university decisionmaking; (2) that black students determine university policy affecting them; (3) that the Buffalo Police Commissioner be removed from office; (4) that all defense research on the campus be halted; (5) that students be given a legitimate role in determining departmental issues, such as wages and tenure for professors; (6) that the work force constructing the new university campus be fully integrated; (7) that the university refuse to cooperate with federal and local investigating officers; and (8) that ROTC be stripped of accreditation, to become merely an extracurricular club. At the same time the demonstrations were taking place, the university was conducting interviews with members of the junior class on their perceptions of the university experience. Although none of the interview questions dealt directly with the demonstrations, many students made comment on them and their reactions to the events surrounding the unrest. Such comments reflect frustration, distrust, hope, indignation, personal commitment, or apathy. This document presents some of the comments on the matter. (Author/HS)

ED 071587



UNIVERSITY RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY RESEARCH

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ON SUNYAB STUDENTS
316 Harriman Library 831-4404

What can we learn from it?

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRO-
DUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM
THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIG-
INATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPIN-
IONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY
REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDU-
CATION POSITION OR POLICY

STUDENT REACTION TO CAMPUS DISRUPTION:

SPRING '69

by Gary Ryba

April, 1970



STUDENT REACTION TO CAMPUS DISRUPTION: SPRING '69

The Spring of 1969 at the University of Buffalo (SUNYAB) campus was a time of student protest -- protest which was a disruption of normal University routine and which at times became forceful and violent. The students' demands for change involved both campus and off-campus issues: 1) that students control 50% of the voting power in University decision-making, 2) that black students determine University policy affecting them, 3) that the Buffalo Police Commissioner be removed from office, 4) that all defense research on the campus be halted, 5) that charges against the "Buffalo Nine" be dropped, 6) that students be given a legitimate role in determining departmental issues, such as wages and tenure for professors, 7) that the work force constructing the new UB campus be fully integrated, 8) that the University refuse to cooperate with federal and local investigating officers, and 9) that ROTC be stripped of accreditation, to become merely an extracurricular club. These issues sparked convocations, teach-ins, rallies, and building take-overs; there were changes in University structure, in course offerings, and in the mood of the University.

The University exists, partly, for students. Students had agitated for change, and students would be most directly affected by change. Yet no one knew (despite profuse assumptions) how the students felt about their changing campus, or how they felt about the way in which those changes were achieved.

At the same time the demonstrations were taking place, the office of University Research was conducting interviews with members of the Junior class. These interviews were not directly related to the campus disturbances, but were part of a larger, four-year study involving student

perceptions of "the university experience."¹ While no specific questions about the campus disorders were asked, the interviewed students were encouraged to speak on any topic which concerned them, and many spoke of the campus unrest. A selection of those comments is the substance of this report: the students' reactions to the events of that stormy semester.

Some cautions are advised. It is tempting to believe that each quotation represents some significant portion of the student population. This is not the case. The original group of students was randomly selected; however, all those interviewed were juniors at the time, so no other portion of the University community is represented. Further, since no specific question on the subject was posed, not all students made direct mention of it. No statistical analysis of the information was made.

Finally, all the selected and edited quotations are out of context. It is possible that some students may have been misinterpreted, however, precautions have been taken to use each statement as it was originally intended.

In examining the students' rationalizations for campus unrest, one is struck not with a sense of covert conspiracy, evil influence, or wanton hooliganism, but rather quite the opposite. One feels instead that there is a sad and profound awareness on the part of some students that the world is basically unfair. At the same time, there is a strong and idealistic optimism in these students that they, perhaps, can make

¹Completed portions of *The University Experience*, a longitudinal study of changing student perceptions of the college experience, are available at the University Research Office. The original group of students interviewed in 1966 was composed of 100 randomly selected Freshmen. Seventy students of that group who were enrolled at UB for the Spring '69 semester were interviewed that March and April, and their interviews were the basis of this report. Fourteen others no longer enrolled at UB were also interviewed and three responded to questionnaires. The remaining 13 were unavailable for interview.

it more fair, and that they should start now.

*If you accept things here, you'll probably accept things in the world when you get out, in business, and everything. You really have to change because what's been going on so far - just from the past year - there's a lot of changes that have to be done in the world and a lot of people think we should start here. (MC #1)*²

One is struck by their sense of frustration born out of unsuccessful attempts (sometimes vicarious) at more acceptable, peaceful forms of protest.

Force scares me and mob action scares me, but I kind of agree with what they are trying to do, so I'm there doing it too. I think changes have to come, and studying my history - which I did so diligently - I can see that changes always come from, are born out of violence and revolution and force. You don't get anything done talking. It's just like you can't sit around talking anymore. (FR #2)

A lot of people say, "It's just the student radicals," but you have to apply pressure if you want changes. I think it should be constructive and you should keep working at it, but if nobody listens to you, you just have to make them listen. (MC #1)

And one is also struck with their deep distrust of those in power, both at the University level and in the society as a whole.

The University is designed primarily for the students and if the student doesn't want to take this course or doesn't want to do that, but wants to do something else instead, they should let them. I think the whole thing that holds everybody back is the fact that they grant degrees. They give degrees so that they can be assured of having the type of people that they want in the future. (MC #4)

It's obvious to me that if this was really a place for learning there would be no grades. There would be nothing like that. Because that's not part of learning. Grades are a practical consideration. (MR #5)

²The source of each quotation has been identified as to sex (M or F), place of residence as a Freshman (R for Resident, C for Commuter), and by an arbitrarily assigned number, as some students are sources for more than one quotation. Many students who lived either on campus (R) or at home (C) as Freshmen have moved into their own apartments by their junior year. The designation has been offered here to help establish to some degree the background of the speaker.

See, you have to have your reasons not to kill in this country. You just can't go to your draft board and say "I don't want to kill." You have to have a reason why you don't want to kill. (MC #6)

But the specific issues -- Project Themis and other defense-sponsored research, the presence of ROTC on campus, the admission of more non-white students, the racial integration of work crews on the new campus, and revision of the academic structure and policies of the school -- all were secondary to the primary issue of increased student power in University decision-making. Many students felt that if the students had a greater voice in University policy formulation, any issue could then be more fairly and satisfactorily resolved. The right to question administrative decisions seemed to many students a fundamental one.

I want to have that right, at least, that I can go and talk to people and have them listen and if they think it's a good idea, take some kind of action, and if it's a bad idea, I want to know the reasons why it's bad. (MC #7)

I think it's really, really good that they're not accepting things like they used to - handed down from the administration. They're starting to challenge things like that . . . just doubt the administration and make the administration stand firm on decisions if they're good, and if they're bad, rebuke them, change them. (MC #8)

Again, a basic distrust of those in power was indicated by some students, although others reacted favorably to the then-present UB administration under Martin Meyerson.

Placing good faith in the faculty and administration to take into consideration student suggestions -- just to hold to that and depend on that doesn't seem to always work. (MR #5)

Sometimes I get the impression that they are trying to impress students with the number of deans and faculty members that they get to talk to and the students really still don't have any power. I think they are making the beginnings right now, but still I kind of think it's a token gesture. (MR #9)

I know the students have a voice, but in the end it is not their decision and I think it should be. I think the school is making a really definite effort to do that. I think they are really very liberal. The administration, everything. (MC #10)

Despite their suspicions of those in power, many students indicated a great faith and confidence in their own ability to make meaningful changes.

I have more faith in students now . . . living with them, talking to them, and a lot of them, they really know what they're doing and they know what they're talking about. (FC #11)

I don't mind that, you know, whether or not they represent the whole campus doesn't really bother me. I think the more avenues that are open to them as far as organizations or committees that determine the curriculum or whatever, I think is fine. (MR #12)

I think we're capable of making decisions. And I think a student, if he realizes he's not capable of making a decision, I think he'll yield and let somebody who perhaps is more capable do it. (MR #14)

Underlying most of these comments was the assertion of the necessity to take a stand on the issues, and to back up that stance with personal commitment.

I feel that there should be some limited demonstrations and there should be unrest and questioning and people should wonder because things like the Vietnam War and geez, the income tax that a poor guy's got to pay - they're getting kind of ridiculous. There's something wrong somewhere. If somebody doesn't see it, they're blind anyhow. This is a place where you're supposed to look into things and try to get an insight into what's going on. (MC #15)

You're finally finding kids that really believe in something and perhaps they're not doing it the way I'd like to see it done, but they're doing things because they believe in it. 'Cause if you're a student on this campus right now and you don't stop and really think exactly what your position is, then I think you're missing the whole boat. (MR #14)

One student felt this way about student commitment on the issue of defense research:

I really didn't think they'd have enough guts to put Themis on this campus. My own feeling is that there's just enough kids on this campus willing to get thrown into jail over getting those buildings torn down again. Those buildings aren't going up. I certainly hope not. (MC #6)

Not all the students were so strongly convinced of the need for change, of the ability of students to make capable decisions, or of their right to have any significant voice in University policy-making.

I don't see that it's our life work to make the University such-and-such. We're just going to finish and get out and we're not really involved in it as we are in our own lives. It's just four years of our time, so why should we feel that we can mold it around to our specifications? (FC #17)

Why all of a sudden do the students want to run part of the school or have a voice in how it's running? I was home two weeks ago and I was talking with my mother, who went to college, and she said she couldn't understand, she says, how the change has come about. She says, "When I went, we went to school and we did our homework and we learned, we did the material in the books and that was it." And she said, "We never even thought about trying to run the school." Of course, I think everyone gets influenced by their parents somewhat so that's maybe why I feel like I do, but, I don't know. I still question it. (MR #18)

Some students could not understand why others would want to rebel against a society which seemed to be offering them so much.

I try to understand why they would be so hostile. I don't know. I don't like it. It's stifling other people and making you feel that you are the one who is strange and different and not them. (FC #17)

A few students seemed to feel or desire no involvement in the issues, but only wished to complete requirements for their degrees as efficiently as possible.

I just intend to get through here with my PA with my high index and go on to graduate school and I care about as much about making decisions in this University as I did in high school: not at all. (MR #19)

I can't get involved in some of these movements that say that this place is so oppressive and everything, because I think that the administration goes out of it's way to make an effort to make it good. In a lot of ways I suppose I should have been involved in more activities, but for some reason I just couldn't. So I think perhaps I'm missing something along these lines. Maybe I should have been pushed into it, but I just didn't. But all in all, as long as I get into graduate school, then I'll be happy. (MC #10)

Others doubted either the sincerity or the intelligence of the students who were challenging a seemingly reasonable status quo.

I just feel that this whole business is very, very immature - especially with the kids trying to act like hippies and play the part. (FR #20)

You can demand the world, you can demand the sky and the moon, you're always confined to reality and-- they're in the wrong country if they think they can get things done by revolution, because this country is not one to do things by revolution. (MC #21)

Two years ago it was so different. Now it's gone into revolutionary rebels, like leftists, communists. Well, they're not communists...they're leftists because they want such radical change and I just don't --I don't even like walking across campus. I'm going to find myself a nice, quiet, country-type school where I can learn what I'm looking for and have it nice and peaceful. I don't like all this ruckus and I don't think it does any good. (FR #22)

They're fighting for things they already have. They just pick up these nine ridiculous demands out of the air and some of them do have relevance, but I think the way they went about it was wrong, and it was immature and they're trying to show how smart they are and how mature they are. (FR #20)

Kids come to school to learn. We should come here and take our courses and learn and not run, not administer. That's what President Meyerson and Dean Siggelkow, people like this, this is their job, I mean they know what they're doing -- at least, they should know if they've gotten the position. I just don't see where the kids want to do everything. (MR #18)

Some students felt that there were real problems to be dealt with, but felt that those presently in power were generally the most capable people to work for those changes. Tampering with the present system

would, for them, involve more dangers than present inequities.

I guess maybe I'll be called old-fashioned, but the administration and the teachers - most of them - have just a little bit more knowledge and experience, especially the administration. They're supposed to be trained in some way for a manner of handling the situation, but I don't think they should be oblivious to student needs. If there was cooperation, I think this is the way it should be, but I'm deadly against violence and I'm deadly against another student interrupting my right to go ahead and study if I want to and not take part in the demonstrations. (FR #23)

Although it's not perfect - not a perfect place - and perhaps some of the motives of some of the people here aren't perfect, but it's still a lot better than other places. That's really what I think of it. (HC #24)

Some students felt that questioning the administration was a good and necessary thing, but were quite disturbed by the extreme actions of the more violent radicals.

I think it's fine that they should demonstrate if they want. They have a right to be heard. But when they go around destroying property like the construction shacks and that, it's going too far. I kind of resent them doing this sort of thing because it's the kind of thing that makes the headlines and would tend to give the University as a whole a bad picture in some people's minds. (HC #25)

I refused to go because I thought, granted, it would have been a worthwhile thing if they had talked about things that were relevant, really relevant to the school, rather than firing the Police Commissioner. (MR #18)

You can't talk about something to somebody without their temper flaring. Nobody will listen to anybody else's viewpoint. It's a loss, as far as I'm concerned, for a learning experience. My idea of a learning experience is to talk to somebody and support his viewpoints and my own, and then later, at leisure, evaluate. It isn't to be shouted at. (MR #26)

Obviously, there was a difference of opinion among students about the urgency of the problems under discussion. Even if they agreed wholeheartedly with the radicals on the basic issues, some students were distressed by the loud and obstreperous manner of some of the radicals.

I'm concerned about the way people are trying to get things done through the use of violence when they keep yelling "peace, peace, peace in Vietnam," and right away here

they have violence, trying to knock down Themis and take over Hayes Hall. The majority - well, right now maybe a slim majority - do not agree with the way these people go about it, even though they may agree with their ideas, or some of their ideas. (MR #27)

What I've seen is incompetence and mayhem and lack of objectivism, excessive emotion, to the point where, walking through the Union I almost got into a fight because I refused to sign a petition. I can't understand this. It doesn't fit my conception of a student. Student participation, as I see it, is an organized and objective movement where you try to improve things, make things better for yourself; not easier, but better. There's a difference, a considerable difference. (MC #26)

Some students who were successfully working toward radical change in quieter, non-violent ways became disillusioned with those who would do no more than scream for change.

I know I worked over there [at college A] every day and by the end of the week I was very discouraged, because the radicals go over there and fill the room and yell and scream like they're doing right now, but they don't really want to get anything done. I think they just like what they're doing. This is their thing. And then across the street all those people are working and staying up every night and working out proposals and grinding them out and yet no one knows about it. It's kind of discouraging after a while. (MR #28)

I could go into a meeting and agree with what was being said and come out objecting, not to what was being said but the way it was being said, and I did this many times. Not many times, but often enough to get sick of it, quit. (MC #26)

Others vacillated between doubt and confidence, often failing to resolve the problem.

At times I'm very gung-ho, "This concerns the students, this is our University..." - let's say a course, one of my teachers talked about this at one of our teach-ins. He was teaching a linguistics analysis course that the students hated. I mean, he said you have never seen such hate for a course in your life. He said that 5 years later you begin to realize that if you hadn't taken this course you would know so much less ... people taking it would say, "Gee, it's got to go. It's such a useless waste." But five years later people would say, "Gee, I'm glad I took it." So when you think about things like that you wonder. (FR #29)

You try and you sort out everything that's happened and no matter what you do, you still come up with the "I just don't know" type of situation. (FC #32)

Despite many students' reservations about the violent aspects of campus unrest, many said they sensed a new mood, a new atmosphere on the campus as the issues were being debated. After the teach-ins, rallies, etc., many students felt a new involvement in the University which they hadn't known before.

The campus has an air of - I don't know - productivity or something or other. I think for once it's much more possible for students to be caught up in things than it used to be. (MC #30)

I think the kids are probably becoming more interested in the school itself. And interested in what's happening to them in it. I kind of like the atmosphere now, whereas I think probably the same time last year I had a more negative attitude towards it. (MR #12)

Now, with a lot of things happening on campus, people are being forced to take an opinion, to decide where they stand, what their ideas are, justify themselves. It's very important in forming your ideals, of what you're going to be, where you're going to take a stand, what kind of people you're going to be. (FR #2)

People are starting to think who never thought before ... now people on the right are starting to think, they're starting to get a little scared so then're starting to think for the first time that maybe everything isn't right and that you have to come over a little bit, make some of the changes. (MR #31)

The teach-ins, particularly, seemed to foster a new mood among members of the academic community, and a new appreciation for the ideas of others.

At the Math Department meeting Friday, it was so great. The faculty and the students and the grad students were all communicating as equals, and not only did they leave it as a meeting, the chairman was very smart. He had coffee brought in and it sort of broke down into discussion groups. And it was really nice; this kind of cooperation in a community is really lovely. (FR #29)

Oh, that week with the teach-ins was just great. Friday night I fell into bed completely exhausted. It was just a great feeling. People, as I said, who would never have

either run into each other before or would just never bothered speaking to each other before were not only speaking superficially, but they were really telling each other how they thought and how they felt and it was really great communication. (FR #33)

Some kids just didn't bother to go to those things that week and if you didn't go to anything that week, you missed a lot out of school. It's not just academic. That's why I'm really not sorry I came here. Academically yes, but otherwise, no. (MR #28)

I went out and I went to these meetings and tried to find out what was going on and what these people were saying. I'd read what they said in the newspapers and this was not what was really being said on campus. I really got quite a bit more aware this semester, not only on campus - policies and so forth - but the whole world. It's not one phase. It's just everything combined. (MC #35)

The changes, then, were not limited to the University as an institution; the students themselves were changing. When asked, "What in your University experience has been of most value to you?" one student replied,

The most value to me, I think -- Well, I have a feeling it's just been in the last few weeks with the teach-ins, really getting involved in the University, in the faculty members, seeing how they work and listening to some of the students' demands or complaints about the University. (MR #34)

Some students mentioned that they became much more receptive to views they had previously refused to even consider.

These few radical groups who would spout off and everything, I'd always think they were wrong. They're just being radical. And, I guess that's the biggest change. I've just learned to listen. (MR #34)

At the same time, one girl was skeptical of how much different from their parents most students really were. It was only a matter of time, she felt, before they would be absorbed into the establishment.

Most of the students - I'll say "them" because I wasn't really involved in it - when they're "grown up" and have families and children, 99 percent of them will think the way the administration thinks now and the grownups in command because most of them are followers and not leaders. But one percent will be leaders and things will change but it'll go slowly. (FR #23)

One student who spent most of his time on the Ridge Lea Campus, isolated from most of the goings-on, seemed untouched by the excitement that other students were experiencing.

It just hasn't affected me much. I'm surrounded by a bunch of people who agree with me. (MC #36)

Of all the problems which precipitated the disruptions, the one which resulted in the most specific, concrete changes was that of academic reform, including student determination of departmental policy and curriculum reform.

I think a lot of the recent activities and a lot of the reforms have helped to make the experience easier. It's perhaps made them more fair. It's eased the plight of the student a little bit and I'm very satisfied. (MR #31)

Some students pointed out that this was the first time that constructive changes were effected without having to go through traditional, bureaucratic channels.

I think especially with the various teach-ins they had and things like that and the ones I went to, it wasn't just a bunch of protest and noise and everything. It was very constructive. I thought it was very good. I thought they accomplished a lot because the way things used to be, I think it took so long before you'd get any results from anything. Changes in departments, changes in requirements, everything else have been made overnight this year and I think it's really good. (MC #30)

I sort of participated in what was going on in the Nursing School and we got so much accomplished just by telling the faculty and the administration what was wrong and what was really necessary and what we wanted to do about it. A few things were accomplished that everyone wanted and knew it was right, where before it was just sitting there and nobody did anything about it. (FC #37)

Students seemed to especially appreciate the increased role they had in their academic lives.

I think the events of the last couple weeks have been very good because I think, if nothing else, it aroused the awareness of some people who are very apathetic and are just willing to sit by and let everybody else make their decisions and run their lives. They have a responsibility to at least express their views and I think this has been done all last week because I know in a lot of departments there are a lot of new reforms and many of them have been initiated by the students and I think this is good. (FC #38)

Well, in the last two or three weeks so many people like myself who have been termed apathetic have gotten just so upset with everything that we're finally starting to say something, say what we feel instead of just coming here, going to classes, going home, going to work, studying, and going back. I wish more people would realize what spirit this has brought about on this campus, and not too many people in the community do. (FC #32)

But, as always, not all students were happy with the changes that were being made.

I don't think it's better. If anything, I think it's probably worse. The kids are starting courses . . . The school, I grant you, has to branch out into different areas, but some of them aren't academic areas, really. They have as far as I can see, nothing to do with academics. (MR #18)

Changes in the attitude of many members of the faculty was another difference mentioned by a number of students. Not all faculty members were equally inspired by the issues, however.

Well, I think since the student disruptions, they've woken up a little bit. But some of the faculty are still going to be the same old faculty. (FR #23)

One student was quite pessimistic about any changes among the faculty, and another completely dismissed the theory that radical faculty members were leading the naive students into revolution.

I hope it will result in something, but I don't think it will. From what I've seen, the faculty has not been affected by the teach-in. There have been no changes. The real problems didn't get discussed. (MR #25)

I think that the students really lead the faculty and I don't know how many of these liberal faculty members would be so liberal if the students weren't always constantly pushing them in this direction. I think the atmosphere is created more by the students. I mean, you've got very aware students here. That's fairly obvious. (MR #9)

But most students praised the actions and attitudes of their professors during the protests.

We just had a teach-in last Friday and -- I've been with the faculty for three years now and I suddenly realized that I didn't know any of them until last week Friday, and all of a sudden I realized that -- I always thought of them just as teachers. I suddenly realized that they're human beings just like the rest of us. (FC #39)

It was wonderful, really. And as a result the teachers are changing. It's going to be a radical upheaval in the structure of the college. It's very beneficial, very good. (FC #40)

Most of the faculty that I know, even if they are against - not specifically against participation in the universities - but even if they are against our point of view, they'll listen, at least, with a fairly open mind. (FR #33)

One student was especially impressed by one of his professors:

He's at all the rallies. He's really -- He goes around and gets a whole viewpoint from everything. He doesn't just sit in one place and say, "I'm radical; I'm going to do this." He's just like all over. His classes aren't that interesting but he tries very hard to understand the student. And any of those teachers don't have to come across the street [to College A teach-ins]. They could be home sleeping like any of the other teachers. They talk about apathy among the students. The faculty is just as apathetic as the students are. (MR #28)

And some professors seemed to be satisfying student cries for relevance in the classroom.

There's a few teachers who will -- Sometimes they'll even forget about what they're supposed to be teaching and discuss what's happening right now. It's almost like, "What I'm teaching here is important but what's going on outside is even more important and we've got to discuss both; we've got to do both. You've got to learn about Descartes but you've also got to learn about Meyerson and all the rest of the people -- what's happening up here. (MC #41)

EPILOGUE

The changes in atmosphere and mood largely dissipated in the year following the original disturbances. Despite a measure of academic reform, most of the problems which generated student disorders in the Spring of '69 remained as sources of irritation in the Spring of '70.

One girl, despite a rather scary (and unfortunately, fulfilled) foreboding of things to come, was nevertheless confident about the future of the University.

Yeah, I think the way the University is growing is great. Changes in courses, radical upheaval, student participation activity, I think it's really going to be frightening for a while, but completely different.
(FR #2)

Another student voiced a not wholly accurate but justified feeling about the effects of a month of protest.

Three weeks later, they realized that nothing had been done, that ROTC was still on campus, that Themis was still going up, that the construction still wasn't integrated, that there still weren't any more black students going to be on campus next year. Nothing was done. (MC #6)

The resulting frustration and reaction has become more intense. A mood of frustration signaled the intensity of aggression to come.